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TAMMANY HALL AND THE DORR REBELLION

SINCE the adoption of the Constitution of the United States, no civil or political conflict has arisen in any state more interesting to the historian of American life or more instructive to the student of political and constitutional matters than the so-called "Dorr Rebellion" in Rhode Island. The six weeks of armed controversy, during the months of May and June, 1842, were but an incident in the three years' struggle for a more popular government in the little commonwealth, and the agitation of the years 1841-1843 was but one step, though the most important, in the change from the oligarchy of 1775 to the democracy of 1888. The Dorr Rebellion was not an isolated fact. An understanding of its meaning and importance can be obtained only by a thorough study of the political and constitutional history of the colony and the state from the reception of the charter of 1663 until the adoption of the suffrage amendment to the constitution in 1888.

The issue underlying this whole struggle was the general right of the people to adopt a new constitution. In the words of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association, the position held by the advocates of a change in the form of government was that "whenever a majority of the citizens of this State, who are recognized as citizens of the United States, shall, by their delegates in convention assembled, draught a constitution, and the same shall be accepted by their constituents, it will be, to all intents and purposes, the law of the State." In other words they declared that a "majority of the 'governed' have at any time, and on any occasion, a right to change their government—a right which being inherent, unalienable and indefeasible, not even they can part with by their free and voluntary act."

In the course of the struggle between the "People's Party" and the "Law and Order Men" or the "Algerines," as they were called by their opponents, several other issues presented themselves. When the rival state governments appealed to the President of the United States to bring the national government and the federal army into the contest, the constitutional issue was raised as to the authority of the national executive as an arbitrator in such crises in the commonwealths. The right of the national legislature and that of the federal judiciary to decide between the two conflicting govern-

ments were most thoroughly discussed in connection with this controversy. It is evident that, though the contest was local, the questions presented were national in importance.

Several other issues came into view before the contest was ended. The refusal of certain state governors to honor the requisition of the *de-facto* governor of Rhode Island to hold in arrest the fugitive leader of the defeated party, added a complication to the situation. The declaration of martial law by the "Law and Order" governor, under power voted him by the "Charter" general assembly, led to the decision of the supreme court of the state of Rhode Island, and to the individual opinion of Justice Woodbury, of the United States Supreme Court, in the famous Luther-Borden case. Again, when the contest had subsided, the trial of the leader of the insurrection gave rise to the novel plea that there could be no treason against a single state, inasmuch as the Constitution of the United States defined treason against the United States only. Further, the natural conflict between legislature and judiciary was emphasized by the action taken by the Rhode Island general assembly, several years afterwards, in ordering that the records of the trial for treason and the conviction of "Governor" Dorr be obliterated from the records of the state.

Not the least interesting among the constitutional, political, legal and social issues which the Dorr Rebellion produced were the various attempts made in other states to interfere in the Rhode Island controversy. The "cause of liberty," so dear to the American people, would not permit them to let this contest pass by without expressions of sympathy at least. From Maine to Louisiana the newspapers freely expressed themselves in favor either of the "People's Party," or of the "Law and Order" government. Within the state of Rhode Island national politics did not enter into the controversy, as leading Democrats joined with the Whigs in establishing the charter government in 1842. Elsewhere the newspapers and the people in general were influenced, almost without exception, by their party predilections as they took sides on the issue.

In Boston the Democratic *Post* was very earnest in its support of the "People's Party" and the Dorr government. It was the first newspaper, outside of Rhode Island, to call attention to the struggle in the neighboring state, and, from the beginning of January, 1842, until long after the "People's Government" had entirely collapsed, the *Post* continued to praise the Suffragists, and to heap obloquy upon the "Algerines" and every opponent of the popular movement. On the other hand, the Boston *Atlas*, true to its Whig principles, found the Democracy hidden behind Dorr and his party, and

vehemently upheld the charter government. As early as April 20, 1842, it said editorially : "The Rhode Island Loco-Foco revolution turns out, as we presumed it would, to have been a bloodless one."

In New York also the newspapers divided along party lines. The *Evening Post*, assisted by the *New Era*, notorious under the editorship of Levi Slamm, was insistent in season and out of season, that the rights of "the people," and of Governor Dorr in particular, should be protected. The *Courier and Enquirer* and the *American* enthusiastically supported Governor King and bitterly commented upon every act of the "revolutionists." No less certain of its position was the Washington *National Intelligencer*, which daily informed its readers of the situation in Rhode Island, and animadverted upon the desperate wickedness of all who opposed the legitimate government in the little commonwealth. Interest in the controversy extended even farther than the national capital. The *Richmond Enquirer* advised the federal government to keep its hands off. "Move not a soldier,—send not a musket into Rhode Island." The New Orleans *Commercial Bulletin* took a different view, and demanded interference. "The posture of affairs in Rhode Island is truly deplorable, and if suffered to proceed much farther will do more to impair American credit and character abroad than any event since the date of our government."

Naturally the people were not far behind the newspapers in giving expression to their sentiments. The strength of the "Law and Order" government was soon perceived, however, and the weakness of the "People's Party" prevented the necessity of any special movement in opposition to it. Mass meetings were held in various cities, Philadelphia and Boston in particular, to express sympathy for the "oppressed people" of Rhode Island. New York took the lead in advising the use of arms in establishing the "People's Government," and in resisting the government *de facto*, even though the latter be aided by the federal authorities.

About the middle of April 1842 the *Evening Post* called attention to a proposed memorial, which was in circulation in the city of New York, "calling on the House of Representatives to impeach President Tyler for his armed interference, or threatened coercive measures against the people of Rhode Island in their struggle to cast off the authority claimed over them under King Charles Second's Charter." This memorial was never presented, but a meeting of sympathy was held in Tammany Hall on the evening of April 27. Aaron Vanderpoel was chosen president for the occasion and A. W. Parmenter, of Rhode Island, presented the cause of the suffragists. Though not numerously attended this gathering prepared

the way for later meetings, when the inherent weakness of the Dorr movement was more clearly perceived.

The inauguration of Governor Dorr, May 3, 1842, was quickly followed by a hasty trip to Washington. Here Dorr met President Tyler, Mr. Webster, Secretary of State, and other leaders of the great political parties, but he failed to obtain sympathy for himself or his party sufficient to encourage him to proceed farther in the attempt to establish his government. Had Governor Dorr passed directly through New York on his return from Washington to Providence, the sequel of events in Rhode Island would have been materially altered. The testimony at hand seems to justify the conclusion that the Civil War, which broke out on May 17, would have been entirely averted. Governor Dorr had learned in Washington that he not only could hope for no help from the national executive, but must also expect to find the federal troops assisting the *de facto* government. He had, however, found the President anxious to avert civil strife, and ready to use his influence to obtain an act of indemnity for the entire People's government. It was evident, even to the enthusiastic suffrage leader, that he could not cope with the national government, even if his party, which he thought to be a numerical majority of the people of Rhode Island, might perhaps successfully resist the Charter government. On his arrival at the metropolis, therefore, he had determined, though very reluctantly, to leave the government *de facto* in peace, and to trust to the good offices of President Tyler to effect a compromise.

Governor Dorr was very cordially received on his arrival in New York. One of his fellow commissioners, Burrington Anthony, had returned at once to Rhode Island ready to carry what comfort he could to his friends at home. The third commissioner, Dutee J. Pearce, who has been called Dorr's right-hand man, remained with his leader. The two Rhode Islanders were invited to attend the Bowery Theatre, that evening, by certain prominent Tammany leaders. The fact of the acceptance of this invitation by the two distinguished visitors was duly announced in the daily press, and was even supposed to have increased the size of the audience. Most notable among the distinguished Tammany men escorting the governor was the Hon. E. F. Purdy, ex-president of the New York Board of Aldermen. This act of courtesy was but the beginning of the attentions which were bestowed upon the People's governor. The time spent in the metropolis was very short, being scarcely more than one day, but every one of the governor's waking hours was monopolized by his new friends.

Saturday forenoon Tammany Hall accorded a reception to the

governor and to Welcome B. Sayles, the speaker of the People's general assembly. Several hours were spent by these two suffrage leaders in talking over the condition of affairs in Rhode Island, and the counsel which Tammany Hall gave to the People's party is evident from the sequel which came less than four days later, the famous attack on the arsenal. When the time came for the governor to resume his journey to Providence he found that a crowd had collected in the park, desirous of obtaining a glimpse of the distinguished stranger. Immediately a procession was formed as an escort, under the head of William H. Cornell. Besides the five hundred people who marched in citizen's dress, the services of a band were obtained, and also a company of volunteer firemen. Governor Dorr and Speaker Sayles were accompanied in their barouche by ex-Alderman Purdy and Slamm, the editor.

The open sympathy thus shown the disheartened governor was accentuated by a communication which he received before leaving the city.

NEW YORK, May 13, 1842.

To Thomas W. Dorr, Governor of the State of Rhode Island;

Sir:—Several military companies of this city and vicinity having tendered their services to form a military escort to accompany you to Providence, we have the honor to apprise your Excellency of the fact. This distinction which they so much admire, we hope will meet with your cheerful acceptance.

With sentiments of the highest respect,

We are, very respectfully, yours

ALEXANDER WING, JR.,

Col. 13 Reg't. N. Y. A.

ABRAHAM J. CRASTO,

Lt. Col. 236 Reg't. N. Y. S. I.

In reply Governor Dorr wrote as follows:—

NEW YORK, May 14, 1842.

To Cols. Wing and Crasto;

Gentlemen:—I return to you my most sincere thanks for the offer contained in your letter of yesterday of an escort of several military companies to accompany me to the city of Providence. It is impossible to mistake the spirit in which this offer is made. It is an indication of the fraternal interest with which you regard the present struggle for their just rights of the people of Rhode Island, whom I have the honor to represent.

While I should not feel justified at the present moment in withdrawing you from your homes and business on the expedition contemplated, allow me to say that the time may not be far distant when I may be obliged to call upon you for your services in that cause to which you will

so promptly render the most efficient aid—the cause of American citizens contending for their sovereign right to make and maintain a republican constitution and opposed by the hired soldiers of the General Government.

In this unequal contest I invoke your aid and that of your associates in arms. We appeal from the Government to the people, and rely upon them in the last resort to defend our rights from every arbitrary aggression.

Be pleased to make my cordial acknowledgements to officers and privates, who have kindly united with you in the honor which has been proffered me; and accept the regards of your friend and fellow-citizen.

THOMAS W. DORR.

During the time that Governor Dorr had been absent from the state the People's government had practically ceased to exist. The executive officers had failed to obtain possession of any of the state papers and documents, and accordingly were unable to perform any executive functions. The legislature had adjourned after a single day's session and many of its members had publicly announced their resignations and their determination no longer to uphold the People's government. The judiciary did not exist, inasmuch as the legislature, during its short session, had failed to choose judges. Many of the prominent leaders of the Suffragists were under arrest and the favor of the federal authorities was evidently with the Charter government. A few men only stood firmly for Governor Dorr and the People's government. On his return to Providence, Burrington Anthony addressed an open-air meeting, which was held in front of the state house. The delegate presented a highly colored account of the results of his flying trip to Washington, and a series of resolutions was passed denouncing all compromises, pledging resistance to all efforts of the Charter government to arrest the leaders of the People's Party, and promising to protect and defend Governor Dorr to the end.

Such was the situation in Providence when Dorr arrived in the city at about ten o'clock Monday forenoon, May 16. A large crowd of enthusiasts and curiosity-seekers greeted him at the station, and escorted him to the residence of Mr. Anthony, which the governor wished to use as his headquarters. Before dismissing his escort Dorr made an address which showed the influence which his New York visit had had upon his plans. A rumor was current in the city that the governor had procured the aid of 500 men from abroad. Dorr denied the truth of this statement, but said that he had been promised the aid of 5000 men, and that he could have them at any time. He was sure of assistance enough from New York to paralyze any force which the United States might use

against the Suffrage party in Rhode Island. The governor then drew a sword and, holding it out, declared that it had belonged to an officer who had died in Florida, and had been presented to him by a brother of this officer ; adding that that sword must never be dishonored while in his possession.

The Suffrage organ, the *Express*, that same day, published a proclamation signed "Thomas W. Dorr, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations." In this official address he presented to the people of the state the facts concerning his trip to Washington. He stated that President Tyler had intimated

an intention of resorting to the forces of the United States to check the movements of the people of this State in support of the republican constitution recently adopted. From a decision which conflicts with the right of sovereignty inherent in the people of this State, and with the principles which lie at the foundation of a democratic republic an appeal has been taken to the people of our country. They understand our cause ; they sympathize in the injuries which have been inflicted upon us ; they disapprove the course which the National Executive has adopted towards this State ; and they assure us of their disposition and intention to interpose a barrier between the supporters of the People's constitution and the hired soldiery of the United States. As your representative, I have been everywhere received with the utmost kindness and cordiality. To the people of the City of New York, who have extended to us the hand of a generous fraternity, it is impossible to overrate our obligation at this most important crisis. It has become my duty to say, that, so soon as a soldier of the United States shall be set in motion, by whatever direction, to act against the people of this State, in aid of the Charter government, I shall call for that aid to oppose such force, which, I am fully authorized to say, will be immediately and most cheerfully tendered to the service of the people of Rhode Island from the City of New York and from other places. The contest will then become national, and our State the battle ground of American freedom. As a Rhode Island man, I regret that the constitutional question in this State cannot be adjusted among our own citizens. They who have been the first to ask assistance from abroad, can have no reason to complain of any consequences which may ensue.

No comment is necessary to show some of the results of the reception which Tammany Hall had tendered to the People's governor of Rhode Island.

While Governor Dorr was in New York he sent a letter to the governor of Connecticut, and, on the day after his return to Providence, he sent another similar letter to the governor of Maine. In these messages he requested the executives to call the attention of

their legislatures to the situation in Rhode Island. He asserted that the people of Rhode Island were "threatened with a military intervention unless they abandoned their constitution and surrendered all their rights." He declared that they were "unable to contend singly against the forces of the United States," and that they must invoke the aid of the other states "in this contest which involves the great principles of American Freedom, and the dearest privileges of a Sovereign People."

The Dorrites, as the comparatively few suffragists who followed the governor in this movement, might properly be called, had decided to assert their rights, in opposition not only to the Charter government of the state, but also to the President and the army of the United States. It is difficult to understand such a situation. No explanation of this decision is possible except that Governor Dorr had become convinced and had convinced his followers that the Democracy of the United States was anxious for the opportunity to rush to the aid of "the people" of Rhode Island. He must have believed either that he could frighten the President into holding back his promised assistance to the Charter government, or else that, if the national executive persisted in sending aid, the People's party would receive not merely the expressed sympathy but also the personal aid of a large portion of the citizens of the nation. Nothing less than the cordial welcome shown him during his short stay in New York and the personal promises of material assistance which he received from Tammany Hall could have led him to this mistaken position. That his head was turned by the hero-worship accorded him furnishes the simplest explanation of his folly.

After Governor Dorr's return to Rhode Island, his New York friends did not cease to keep up the agitation in that city. A call was issued for a meeting in the Park in front of the City Hall, which contained such signatures as those of Stephen Allen, John I. Morgan, Walter Bowne, A. Vanderpoel, William C. Bryant, Samuel J. Tilden, Elijah F. Purdy, Alexander Stewart and Levi D. Slamm. The meeting was largely attended, the various newspaper reports giving the number present as from three thousand to twelve thousand. Churchill C. Cambreleng was chosen president, and, among the long list of vice-presidents nominated by E. J. Purdy, were the names of most of the signers of the call, some of whom were not present. The meeting was addressed by Vanderpoel, Cambreleng, Ely Moore, and others, and the resolutions adopted expressed confidence in the Dorr party, and declared that President Tyler ought not to interfere in the affairs of Rhode Island in any way. A corresponding committee of twelve was appointed, to whom was left the

duty of continuing the movement in behalf of the People's party. This committee consisted of Vanderpoel, Purdy, Tilden, Moore, Slamm, and others, among whom the most ardent of Dorr's supporters were Slamm and Purdy.

Editor Slamm, in the New York *New Era*, immediately began to urge that armed assistance should be given to the Dorr party, in opposition to the national government. "All that is contemplated and all that has been asked," he said, "is to raise men enough to resist" the United States soldiers. An official bulletin appeared in the editorial columns of the *New Era*, entitled "Enrollment of Volunteers," the latter portion of which read as follows :

And, whereas it is apprehended that the President of the United States, unobservant and forgetful of the duties imposed upon him, may, in a false construction of his prerogative, send mercenary soldiers of the Federal Government into the territory of our sister State of Rhode Island for purposes offensive against and dangerous to the liberties of the people; for these reasons, we, citizens of the United States, who herein-after subscribe their names, appealing to Divine Providence for the purity of our motives, pledge 'our sacred honor' to hold ourselves in readiness, to be organized into companies of 'Patriot Volunteers,' under such officers as shall by ourselves be elected, and upon the requisition of Governor Dorr to march at the shortest notice to the aid of our Republican brethren of Rhode Island in the event that any *armed interference* be made by the Federal Government to the jeopardy of their *Inalienable* and *indefeasible* rights.

This official bulletin appeared in the *New Era* on May 20, and must therefore have been prepared for publication not later than the nineteenth. It was in the early morning of the eighteenth that Governor Dorr made the attack upon the arsenal at Providence, which was defended by the Charter authorities without the aid of the federal troops. The attacking force failed to obtain a peaceful surrender, and Governor Dorr ordered that one of his cannons should be fired. The audacity of this order can scarcely be conceived. In a dense fog, with less than two hundred men, with almost no ammunition for their two small cannon, the order is given to fire upon a building, built of stone, stocked with powder and balls, and fully guarded. If a gun had been fired, the cannons in the arsenal would have murderously ploughed down the unprotected attacking force. But the guns did not go off. They were flashed twice, but without result. The attack was a failure. No blood was shed, but the little band was compelled to withdraw from the field. Governor Dorr would have fired upon the arsenal, had he been able. If he had succeeded, he would very possibly have fallen at the first return fire. In any

case, doubtless, the sound of the first gun, on that foggy night, would have caused blind attack and counter-attack, and great loss of life might easily have followed. The New York friends of the People's governor are not responsible for the failure to begin a true civil war in Rhode Island.

Barely had the "Enrollment of Volunteers" editorial appeared in the *New Era* when the news of the farcical failure of the attack on the arsenal reached the metropolis. According to all human probability, the "war was ended." Even the enthusiastic New Yorkers now saw that further aid was useless. "Judging from their looks" said the New York *Commercial Advertiser*, "never did a set of people feel before quite so foolish and forlorn as did the leaders of the Park meeting of insurgent sympathizers on the receipt of the news from Rhode Island yesterday. They tried to whistle their courage up for a while, and even attempted to deceive themselves by the miserable lie that it was Governor King who had fled and not the puissant Dorr. But it was no go. The flag which had been kept flying for several days at Tammany Hall, in honor of Dorr and his proceedings, was struck, and all looked as though 'melancholy had marked them for her own.'"

One only of the leaders among the Dorr sympathizers continued to uphold the fortunes of his friend, even after he had fled from the state. Levi Slamm, whose paper had met with a natural death, is reported to have made a trip to Woonsocket, just over the border line from Massachusetts, and to have spent several hours urging further resistance. He was present also, with a small band, at the gathering at Acote's Hill, near the end of June, but hastened home when Dorr a second time became a fugitive. Thus ignominiously ended the great Tammany movement to set up a popular government in Rhode Island, in opposition to the *de facto* government and the federal authorities.

ARTHUR MAY MOWRY.